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ABSTRACT

Melville's Captain Ahab might stand as an archetype for the person who attempts to control rather than discover. Such persons inevitably limit their own potential and suppress expression and development in those around them. A teacher who taught first in middle school and now on the college level found that despite her vow never to become a Captain Ahab, she had become controlling and rigid in the classroom. Though she cared deeply about her students and took a personal interest in each of them, they for various reasons perceived her as cold and unapproachable. While she still believes in rules, structure and high expectations, she has learned to temper these tendencies with other qualities. According to the Myers-Briggs personality typology, she is an ISTJ (Introvert, Sensing, Thinking, Judging), a personality respected in this culture for its dependability, organization, structure and responsibility. In order to accommodate her students' needs, however, she attempted to incorporate some of the qualities of the ENFP, a personality respected for its enthusiasm, imagination, and concern for people. Simple changes such as the way a teacher dresses go a long way. Before she goes to class each day, she gives herself a little pep talk about being friendly and open. If teachers want to be advocates rather than adversaries, they must let their students know that they care about them as individuals. (TB)

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The Ahab Teacher

In his discussion of Moby Dick, Alfred Kazin maintains that "Ahab's drive is to prove, not to discover. . . . He seeks to dominate nature, to impose and to inflict his will on the outside world" (ix). Reading these words as a college senior I marveled at the magnificent power and control of Ahab. In a very real sense he was a hero, a hero for what much of humanity had lost. But at the same time I saw, as I read each chapter, the destructive, manipulative potential that accompanies uncontrolled power.

I eventually wrote my term paper for this undergraduate literature course on the destructive nature of authority in Moby Dick. I truly believed, and still do, that people who want power and control, limit their own potential and suppress expression and development of those around them. They are always trying to prove rather than discover. I vowed never to be a Captain Ahab. However, as a teacher of unruly teenagers, a teacher of freshman composition, and a teacher of literature, I find myself without warning, slipping on the captain's hat and boarding the Pequod, which strangely resembles an English classroom.

I'm, however, not always to blame for sporadic lapses into tyrannical rule. After all, students (the very ones who complain about Ahab-like nature) feed and stimulate the Ahab in me. In class discussion they look to me to accept or reject their ideas and answers. They ask me how long an essay must be. And, every semester someone always asks, "Is that last statement going to be on the exam?" And to be honest at times I like being the center of attention, the "giver of the grades." There is something in my egocentric nature that enjoys the power and control that students give me.

Fortunately, though, I do not always portray Captain Ahab. Over my five years of teaching I've realized my strengths and my weaknesses as an Ahab teacher and have tried to shift some of my power and authority onto my, sometimes quite reluctant, students. In fact, there are times now that I seem to be more of an Ishmael, informally sitting back and observing my students teach themselves and each other through fishbowl activities, peer response groups, or group presentations. My struggle then each semester has been trying to fuse two diverse personalities into one brilliant English instructor--an instructor with a portion of Ahab and a portion of Ishmael that balance and complement each other.

Today, I would like to take a few minutes and show you **why** I make a conscious effort in the class room to adjust some of my personality traits and what some of the positive **results** have been. First, how many of you here teach or have taught junior high school? Do you have a nickname? Is it a flattering nickname? When I taught junior high school the students nicknamed me the "Wicked Witch of Room 113." Of course, they

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also had a shorter, harsher version of the nickname etched into the outside of my classroom door. When I first heard my new title (I actually read it in a student's note to a friend which was a learning experience for me not to read their notes anymore), I had a mixed reaction.

One side of me, the Captain Ahab side, said, "Students just don't know how to appreciate a strict, organized teacher. Don't take them seriously. They're only thirteen. What do they know. Besides you don't need a bunch of thirteen-year-olds for friends anyway." But another side of me, perhaps the captain's alter-ego, wanted to be liked. Like most first year teachers I wanted to win the hearts of my students. (reference to Anne Shirley in the movie Anne of Avonlea) In fact, I desperately wanted my name to appear in the school paper as "Most Popular Teacher" or "Most Hip Teacher" or even "Most Fun Teacher." But it never did.

In many respects I didn't deserve the title of "wicked witch." I was then and am now a good teacher. But after several years of reflection and classroom experience I realize in some aspects that was a nickname I earned. I may have been strict and organized, which I think are good teacher traits, but I was also unfriendly and cold. I cared about my students, but I never showed them in a way they could understand.

I, like Alfred Kazin said about Ahab, was out to **prove** to my students, their parents, the school administrators, and to myself that I was a good English teacher. And because I was bent on proving my abilities instead of discovering them in the classroom setting, I failed to recognize many needs my students had, their potentials, and their creativity.

Let me share with you a bit of my past, my teaching past, in what I now call Captain Ahab's Classroom. In this classroom there were basically four areas the set me apart as an Ahab.

CAPTAIN AHAB'S CLASSROOM

- **Rule-Oriented**--My classroom was more like boot camp than a writing workshop--no talking in the ranks, no deviating from "Rule-of-Two," which was my structured approach to writing: two inch margins, double space, etc. and no moving desks together and messing up my straight lines, unless it was a scheduled peer edit day.

- **Structure**--When I was in college, I hated it when my professors would get so far behind on the syllabus that we would never catch up. It bothered me that they were so unorganized. If they couldn't keep to the schedule they made, then why did they keep that schedule. As a teacher, I have a schedule to keep. When I taught junior high school, there was x-amount of material to cover in x-amount of time. Push. Push. Push. Did it matter if the students had not mastered adverbs? Did it matter if they wanted to spend one more week on poetry because they were having so much fun writing their own? Schedule. Schedule. Schedule. I like

things to run smoothly, but I failed to make judgments based on individual cases and classes. Instead, my syllabus or unit outline began controlling the pace of the class.

- **Expectations**--I get upset when students don't take school as seriously as I always have. It doesn't seem to bother some not to turn an assignment in on time, to hand write when I've asked for typewritten, or only do half page journal entries instead of full page journal entries. My mother keeps reminding me that not all students can be like I was. Not all students are going to love writing book reports, diagramming sentences and turning essays in before the deadline. You have to wonder how many of the crew on the Pequod would have been as energetic about finding Moby Dick had there not been a gold coin involved.

- **Presentation** (subtitled: dress code)--Some of you might think this is rather an odd or shallow category, but it was a parent's comment some five years ago mixed with student evaluations from the university that made me start thinking about the structure of my teaching approach. During parent/teacher conferences, a Mother, well-intentioned I'm sure, said, "Jessica's afraid to come and ask you questions because she says you don't look like you want to help her and you don't care whether she does well or not." This mother went on to explain that it was not only my body language--stiff, prim and proper--but it was also my clothing. I think a lot of it had to do with the school and the area where I taught. Most of the teachers dressed really casually as did our students because the school was in a working class area. I, however, came to teach after a brief stint as an executive secretary for a Fortunate 500 company. My entire wardrobe consisted of tailored shirts and skirts.

That's a bit of the picture of what my early teaching years were like. Why have I found it important? Think for a moment about what happens when teachers become too structured and rule-oriented? We create little robots who mimic our every thought. This is particularly evident in their writing. Students write for Captain Ahab. They learned long ago that to succeed (i.e. and frequently in school success is equated with an "A") they must write what the teacher wants to hear. They assimilated the rules early: don't use "I," don't end a sentence with a preposition, don't begin a sentence with a coordinating conjunction, etc. This writing frequently turns out stiff and unnatural. There is no voice, only pseudo-academic prose forming five-paragraph essays. My students' writing was like this.

After two years of teaching, one on the secondary level and one on the university level, I wasn't happy with certain aspects of my teaching--my students were looking to me for answers, their essays were competent but dull, group work rarely happened and

when it did it was, in my eyes, a disaster. I wanted to try and use all the activities that composition theory books had told me were the best for students to learn. But, it's hard to have a student-centered classroom when you're a teacher-centered instructor.

After my first semester of teaching on the university level, I methodically and prudently read each of my student evaluations. Luckily, my students didn't find the semester nearly as disastrous as I had seen it, but two questions, with their low marks, really stood out.

- The teacher is friendly and approachable.
- The teacher is concerned with the progress of the students.

It's amazing how a student's perception, rather right or wrong, can influence their learning in the classroom. Of course, I cared about my students. I daily encouraged them to come and see me before or after school, to come to my office and just chat, to see me as their advocate not their adversary. But I don't think I was very convincing. It could be that despite the fact I **said** come to my office because I want to help you, my appearance, my manner, **showed** a different story.

I realized that day that I had become a Captain Ahab. For whatever motivation, I spent too much time in front of the class telling them what they should know and when they should know it. Group activities and peer edit days weren't working because I wasn't in control on those days and I was on every other day. Whose classroom should it be: mine or the students?

How did I go about changing my personality? Actually, I didn't "change" my personality, I only adjusted certain aspects of it. According to Isabel Myers, "good personality development is becoming comfortable with relying principally on one's preferences . . . while developing unpreferred processes to a useful level of adequate competency" (qtd. in Jensen and DiTiberio 6). In other words, personality doesn't change but "unpreferred" characteristics just develop.

The Myers - Briggs Type Indicator typed me as an ISTJ--Introvert, Sensing, Thinking, Judging. For those of you who are unfamiliar with or wary of "personality testing" devices, look at the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator not as a listing of categories that individuals neatly fall into. That would suggest a static trait. Instead, this indicator illustrates preferences people have and, of course, preferences can often change depending on the context of the situation.[1]

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[1] I am much indebted to the work of Paula Perich and her research study conducted on Linda Uhlenkott and myself Fall semester 1992 for English 737 at the University of Nevada, Reno.

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POSITIVE QUALITIES OF AN ISTJ TEACHER

- dependable
- accurate about information
- accept responsibility and often do extra work
- always look calm and composed in a crisis
- hard-working
- organized, which often gives them administrative roles
- consistent and practical

*adapted from Personality and the Teaching of Composition

NEGATIVE QUALITIES OF AN ISTJ TEACHER

- rarely show much emotion
- hard to distract or discourage from preplanned activities
- expect everyone to be logical and analytical, like they are
- tend to override less forceful people
- tend to be "suspicious of imagination and intuition"

*adapted from Personality and the Teaching of Composition

POSITIVE QUALITIES OF AN ENFP TEACHER

- enthusiastic innovators
- imagination and initiative for new projects
- concern for people and can be inspiring teachers
- extend themselves to people around them
- decisions are often made based on individuals rather than rules

*adapted from Personality and the Teaching of Composition

I took some time to evaluate what was successful in my teaching and what wasn't and where I could make the changes. Let me share some of the results with you from my new classroom.

CAPTAIN AHAB'S CLASSROOM WITH ISHMAEL-LIKE ADJUSTMENTS

Rule-Oriented--I still have rules. I don't like papers to be turned in late, but I have become more flexible about deadlines when students talk to me in advance. My syllabus is no longer a ten-page basic training manual, but a general guideline which students should try to follow. I encourage my students to seek advice and counsel on their work from the other students, often during class time.

Structure--I still think being structured and organized are two of my best attributes. However, they must be tempered. Because of my need to "stick to the syllabus," I now schedule several "open" days each semester so units can be extended if the students are enjoying what they're doing or if they need more time mastering the concept. I try now to have more of a flexible daily routine, depending on student need. I also have taken myself out of the "center of attention" role. My classrooms are based more on small group work, fish bowl activities and large group work where students take turns leading the discussions.

Expectations--This doesn't mean I don't push my students to work hard and meet my expectations, but it does mean I've had to change my approach. I don't know anything that turns a student off more than frequent lectures about why they should be more responsible, etc. Instead, I try to be more encouraging on a one-on-one basis. I try to find out why they aren't as enthusiastic about English. Finally, I try to share my enthusiasm about English, making them want to be a part of things. Instead of counting success by looking at grades, I feel successful when quiet, shy student participate in activities and students write on their evaluations they feel they learned something in the course.

Presentation--This has been the hardest obstacle for me to overcome. Often shyness is mistaken for snobbishness. I seem to be naturally aloof and this makes my students uncomfortable. Before I go to class each day, I give myself a little pep talk about being friendly and open. This doesn't mean I feel I have to be my student's best-friend. But if you want to be an advocate rather than an adversary, you must let them know you care about them as an individual. Sometimes we take a few minutes in class to discuss their weekends, problems on campus or being homesick. I also usually try to get to the room a few minutes early and strike up a social conversation with some of the students. I think this has worked. I have a greater number of

students come to me before and after class and to my office to ask for suggestions and opinions with their work.

Relinquishing control hasn't been easy and I still occasionally slip into my Ahab routine of control and domination, especially these days when I'm studying for my comprehensive exams and trying to manage too many activities. Sometimes I worry that if I don't give a lecture they won't know everything they must know. But part of a student's initiation into a university or any educational setting is learning to survive. Survival, for many, is slipping by, listening to lectures and cramming several weeks worth of reading into a twelve hour period before the exam. However, what is really gained by such superficial practices?

A basic learning principle, founded in my secondary education courses, is students learn better when they are involved and active participants. When a classroom becomes a student-centered environment, they see they have a say and motivation becomes more real and less dependent upon grades given by Captain Ahab. Perhaps one of the greatest days in my teaching experience is when I read the following student comment that showed my shift from adversary to advocate, "[Miss] Chapman is friendly and doesn't dominate. She is easy to talk to."

Thank you.

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